



Making meaning of social justice focused international service-learning across courses and over time

Rebecca McNamara, doctoral candidate, Western Michigan University [beckymc11@yahoo.com]

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Summary

This research paper examines the participants' experience of critical international service-learning, which is located at the intersection of service-learning, social justice education, and international education. Butin (2007) suggests that there has been minimal overlap between the pedagogies of service-learning and social justice education even though they are grounded in the same values. Bolstering that overlap, Mitchell (2007) summarizes the differences between traditional service-learning and critical service-learning in terms of "its attention to social change, its questioning of the distribution of power in society, and its focus on developing authentic relationships between higher education and the community served" (p. 101).

International service-learning (ISL) is a growing practice for colleges. Campus Compact found that in 2009, 56% of their member institutions had ISL opportunities, which is an increase of 24% from 2002 (Campus Compact, 2002, 2009). Very few researchers have empirically examined critical ISL (Camacho, 2004; Kiely, 2004, 2005; King, 2004). From these studies, we know that for students to critically analyze social structures they need to have an experience that exposes them to contradictory information, which creates a sense of dissonance for them (Kiely, 2005; King, 2004). Students also need to build a caring community with the other student participants as well as build caring relationships among members of the community (King, 2004).

Utilizing a phenomenological approach, the researcher collected data through in-depth phone interviews with 19 participants who were previous students in one of five selected ISL courses between 2003 and 2011. Participants reviewed transcripts of the interviews and added additional comments through email conversation. Bracketing the researcher's experience, member checks, and an external auditor were used to increase the rigor of this qualitative study.

Preliminary findings show that participants described (a) having challenging and intense experiences while in the host country that often were springboards for deepening their learning experience; (b) having an emotional connection to peer students, local people, and the culture of the host country while at the same time having experiences of being an outsider as a Westerner in a developing country; and (c) experiencing satisfying service experiences that sometimes had unintended consequences for the community. These findings could improve the practice of critical international service-learning.

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